EMS workers deal with death on a daily basis

By TED SULLIVAN, Chronicle Staff Writer

Central Valley Fire Chief Brett Waters remembers answering the call to save his dad's life like it was yesterday.

"Man down, not breathing, no pulse, CPR in progress," the call said.

Waters slammed down the phone and paged an ambulance crew, hopped in his fire engine and arrived at his dad's office to find an off-duty cop performing CPR on his dad.

Four minutes had passed.

Waters unsnapped his 70-year-old father's Western shirt and ripped off his T-shirt. He grabbed the external defibrillator, greased the two paddles and fastened them on his dad's chest.

"Charging to 200 joules," Waters yelled. "Clear."

No pulse.

"Charging to 300 joules," Waters yelled. "Clear."

Still no pulse.

"Charging up to 360 joules," he yelled. "Clear."

Flatline.

Waters hovered over his dad, on his knees, with his arms stiff and straight, then began administering CPR with thrusts to the chest.

One, two, three, four, five thrusts.

Breathe.

One, two, three, four, five.

Breathe.

Still nothing.

They lifted his dad into the ambulance and Waters jumped in the driver's seat of the ambulance and raced him to the emergency room.

Doctors and nurses worked on him for 20 minutes at the hospital, giving him three more rounds of shocks along with heart medication.

"That was it," Waters said. "It was just his time to go."

He pulled a white sheet over his dad's face and went to tell his mom and wife. His father died of a massive heart attack on that day 15 years ago when Waters was the fire chief in Red Lodge.

Waters is just one of dozens of emergency responders in Gallatin County who face death and trauma for a living. They respond to everything from car crashes and hunting disasters to violent crimes and construction accidents on a near-daily basis.

Responders on the front lines of death face emotional, physical and psychological stress that must be confronted following each emergency.

NOTIFYING FAMILIES OF DEATH

Gallatin County Sheriff's Chaplain Warren Hiebert isn't always a welcome guest at the front door.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Hi, my name's Warren Hiebert. I'm the chaplain," he says to people when he arrives to deliver a death notification. "May I come in?"

He walks into their homes and asks everyone to sit down.

"I have some very bad news for you," he tells them. "I'm here to help you, offer a prayer, do whatever I can in this time."

And then he waits for a response.

"I've had everything from no reaction to running around the house hysterical," said Hiebert, 59. "You let them scream, cry, hit. You let them respond in all kinds of ways."

Several years ago, after a man had learned his son had committed suicide, the man told Hiebert, "Go away, I don't need you. I don't need your help. Leave me alone."

But Hiebert stayed.

The man later asked what law-enforcement officials were doing with his son's body elsewhere in the house. Hiebert told him the officers were investigating the death, gathering evidence and canvassing the scene.

The man went outside on the porch for a cigarette and Hiebert followed him. They sat together silently, staring at the mountains while the man puffed his smoke. Hiebert later gave him a glass of water.

An hour went by.

Then two.

They hardly talked.

But eventually, "He hugged me and said, 'Thanks chaplain for being here. I don't know what I would have done without you,'" Hiebert said.

The chaplain has delivered more than 100 suicide and 400 unexpected death notifications in 15 years with the assistance of local coroners, and nearly every one of those notices is delivered in person.

"Heart wrenching," Hiebert said of the job. "I can be emotionally moved (along) with family members and loved ones."

Hiebert talks to his wife, exercises, eats healthy and prays to relieve the stress from delivering death notifications.

"I've got friends, I've got counselors, I've got pastors who have told me, 'Warren, anytime you want to talk, let me know,'" he said.

PART OF THE JOB

Each call shapes the responder's life.

"There's no one who can say the daily tragedy of bad calls don't affect who we are," said Kris Kaull, operations manager for American Medical Response. "The day a tragedy doesn't affect us on some level is the day we should get out of this job."

Everyone from police and firefighters to ambulance crews and chaplains agree their jobs aren't for everyone. It takes professionalism, focus, stress management and an ability to act under pressure.

Responders know what they're getting into.

"You're trained for it, you're prepared for it, but you don't know how you're going to react," Central Valley Fire Operations Chief Kevin Strickler said. "Until you actually get to that point and see that, you don't know."

Nothing prepares a person for responding to a burned body, pulling a dead body from the river or cleaning severed human remains from a bad car wreck or plane crash.

"The bodies are mushed," Waters said. "The only thing keeping them together is clothes."

Strickler recalled a time when a man in downtown Belgrade walked across the train tracks downtown and fell asleep, his body across the rails, and then a train plowed right through him.

His body was cut in half, both of his legs were severed.

"And he was alive," Strickler said.

He and Waters are seasoned responders, with nearly 50 years of firefighting experience between them, and not much shocks them anymore.

Not that they're hardened.

"We're adapted to it," Strickler said. "We've seen it, we're exposed to it."

As Waters said, "Somebody's got to do it."

CLOSE TO HOME

Every man and woman responding to an emergency call has the same fear.

Is it going to be a loved one on the other end?

"Tragedies hit very close to home in rural areas like Montana," Kaull said. "A fatality crash can resonate through the community, schools and even touch responders that were not directly involved."

Responders in Big Sky, Amsterdam, Three Forks and Manhattan often know the people they pull from crashed cars, rush to the hospital or zip into body bags.

It even happens in Belgrade and Bozeman.

"That's probably one of the toughest parts of the job, knowing that a fair share of the time you're going to be responding to people you know," Strickler said of smaller departments. "You know them all. You were raised with them."

And seeing dead or injured children, no matter how many times, is a wrenching experience.

"Small children and infants will affect everybody," Strickler said. "It will get to you. Your heart rate goes up; you just don't want to see that."

Many of the veterans will take those calls, shielding the bodies from younger crew members to protect them.

Why put anyone new in that position?

"Pediatric calls seem to be the toughest to deal with, although EMTs and paramedics routinely care for the sick and injured, the pediatric 911 call will always cause the responder's heart to race a little faster," Kaull said.

STRESS MANAGEMENT

Every agency has different methods of allowing responders to cope with their stress following a death.

"The key is to have an out to share your feelings - whether it is exercise, talking about the call in a safe environment, meditation or prayer," Kaull said.

In some cases, people participate in a "critical incident stress debriefing" following an accident, such as the crash on North 19th Avenue last month in which two boys were killed.

Responders to that wreck attended a debriefing to figure out the accident's impact on them and what they might go through physically, mentally and emotionally afterwards.

"It's not a warm, fuzzy type thing," Hiebert said. "It's more of a fact thing" to learn about dealing with such incidents. "It makes (responders) stronger. We want to keep them healthy."

But the debriefings aren't routine following fatality responses because responders prefer to handle the stress within their own departments. They also say it's not needed unless it's special circumstances such as the 19th Avenue crash involving teenage boys.

Many of the agencies' chiefs and managers observe their crews to gauge whether they're struggling. The responders huddle, ask each other how they're doing and discuss the incident at department headquarters. They can also speak to the chaplain.

It's an unspoken camaraderie, knowing they're in it together.

"We deal with having to talk to our guys every day about what they did, what they saw and what they couldn't do," Waters said. "They want to do more. They feel that they could do more. That causes stress, when they can't save a person.

"We're compassionate. We'll listen. ... if you hold it in, it will eat you."

And then it's back to work.